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WISDOM: PLATO, ARISTOTLE, AND NIETZSCHE

by
Ann Dolinko

There is a fundamental opposition in the concept of wisdom and truth as conceived by Plato, Aristotle, and Nietzsche. Plato and Aristotle are optimistic and it can be argued that they are idealistic thinkers whose philosophies rest on a foundation of reason and order from which truth can be found. Nietzsche, on the other hand, has renounced reason as an explanation of existence and as a basis for apprehending truth. According to Nietzsche, the order and reason, which Plato and Aristotle state as the unifying essence of their philosophies and of existence, are in fact an attempt to avoid and escape from the "burden of existence." The optimistic concept of truth as conceived by Plato and Aristotle is unsatisfactory for Nietzsche who states, when discussing Greek philosophical thinking:

whereas the current optimism has treated the universe as knowable, in the presumption of eternal truths, and space, time, and causality as absolute and universally valid laws. Kant showed how these supposed laws serve only to raise appearance—the work of Maya—to the status of true reality, thereby rendering impossible a genuine understanding of that reality.¹

The optimism of the Greek philosophers is no longer plausible in modern times and the terror of existence is beginning to reveal itself, as the reasoned order of the Greek philosophy is attacked by modern philosophers like Nietzsche. Nietzsche seeks truth in the realm of artistic illusion, such as in music and in Greek tragedy. In the perspective of this crisis one must examine where a modern

philosopher such as Nietzsche seeks wisdom and truth, and how the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle relates to the concept of truth, as conceived by Nietzsche.

According to Plato, truth is determined by perception and reason. Ultimate truth is found not in the particular existence of individual things, but in the wisdom of the forms. These forms are universal truths which exist eternally and unchanging in an unperceivable reality. These forms, as presented in the platonic dialogue, are, according to Nietzsche's view, the beginning of art and philosophy attempting to become one. As Nietzsche writes, "It is at this point that philosophical ideas begin to entwine themselves about art, forcing the latter to cling closely to the trunk of dialectic." (Nietzsche p.88). Ironically Plato, in attempting to renounce art which he thought to be, "...the imitation of an imitation and hence belonged to an even lower order of empiric reality..." (Nietzsche p.87), created his own imitation of an imitation in the guise of the forms, bodiless essences encompassing reality. By stating this concept, Plato is implying that the reality which man perceives is only an imitation, a shadow of what is true. In the end all existence is unified under the beauty and truth of the forms. The knowledge of this idea is wisdom, that all being is ultimately united under the beauty of the forms. As is written in the *Symposium*:

...how foolish would he be not to recognize that beauty in every form is one and the same! And when he perceives this he will abate his violent love of the one, which he will despise and deem a small thing, and will become a lover of all beautiful forms; in the next stage he will consider that the beauty of the mind is more honorable than the beauty of outward form.²

For Plato, truth is found in the universality of being and not in particulars. Nietzsche speaks directly against this concept when he discusses tragedy. He states that not only is this reasoned sense of universal truth a protective guise against the pity of being, but it also is a stoic avoidance of individual awareness. As he states:

No matter how deeply pity moves us, that pity saves us from the radical 'pity of things,' even as the parable of myth saves us from the direct intuition of the cosmic idea, as idea and word save us from undammed pouring forth of the unconscious will. It is through the workings of the marvelous Apollonian illusion that even the realm of sound takes plastic shape before us... Thus the Apollonian spirit rescues us from the Dionysiac universality and makes us attend, delightedly, to individual forms. (Nietzsche p.128)

For Plato there is no enjoyment in the particulars, in "individual forms," no desire connected with the body, only the desire of pure beauty as found in the universality of the forms.

The philosopher in pursuit of wisdom and truth, according to Plato, is a lover of the soul, spending his life activating his mind, not his body. Plato says that there is a dualism between the soul and the body. In *Phaedo*, Plato says that all things are divided into the visible and the invisible, the soul belonging to the invisible and the body to the visible realm. As Plato states, "Hence soul rather than body is like the invisible, while body rather than soul is like the visible." (Kaufman p.119) Plato then equates the visible body with the temporal mortal self, while the soul is immortal, belonging to the realm of the forms. As he says:

...on the one hand we have that which is divine, immortal, indestructible, of a single form, accessible to thought, ever constant and abiding true to itself; and the soul is very like it: on the other hand we have that which is human, mortal, destructible, of many forms, inaccessible to thought, never constant nor abiding true to itself; and the body is very like that. (Kaufmann p.119)

This philosophic concept of an immortal soul united with truth and beauty, is precisely an example of the idealistic optimism which

Nietzsche discredits. Rather than finding truth, this is an attempt to avoid reality, "...his mission is to make existence appear intelligible and thereby justified. If arguments prove insufficient, the element of myth may be used to strengthen them—that myth which I have described as the necessary consequence, and ultimate intention, of all science." (Nietzsche p.93) This does appear a rather mythical justification, for Plato says that it is simple for the philosopher in search of truth to abstain from bodily pleasures and to accept death, for after death his soul will be completely liberated from his body and obtain the boundless height of the divine. In Plato's philosophy, therefore, there is an inherent dualism between body and soul, and as much as the soul seeks wisdom and truth, it will join the eternal world of the forms.

Whereas for Plato the forms exist regardless of human perception, for Aristotle the forms are dependent upon human perception. For Aristotle, form, essence, and matter are inherently dependent on one another, and cannot exist independently. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche says that music is essence without form:

All possible efforts, excitements and manifestations of will, all that goes on in the heart of man and that reason includes in the wide, negative concept of feeling, may be expressed by the infinite number of possible melodies, but always in the universality of mere form, without the material; always according to the thing-in-itself, not the phenomenon—of which melodies reproduce the very soul and essence as it were, without the body. (Nietzsche p.99)

Aristotle says that music, or the essence of any art, is embodied directly in the soul of the individual artist. The soul is the essence and substance of art. According to Nietzsche, the entire world gives form and substance to music: "We, therefore, might just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will." (Nietzsche p.99). The tragic spirit, according to Nietzsche, is the embodiment, or the form of music. Music thus gives birth to Dionysiac art. "Once we grant that music raised to its highest power must similarly try to find an adequate embodiment, it stands to reason that it will also succeed in discovering a symbolic expression for its proper Dionysian wisdom. And where should we look for that expression if not in tragedy and the

tragic spirit?" (Nietzsche p.101) Aristotle's definition of art as universal experience is very similar to the concept of Dionysian wisdom stated by Nietzsche. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle defines art as arising, "when from many notions gained by experience one universal judgement about a class of objects is produced." (Kaufmann p.247) For Aristotle, art is the knowledge of universals, while experience is the knowledge of particulars.

A fundamental difference, however, in art as conceived by Aristotle and by Nietzsche is that for Nietzsche, art leads to truth, and for Aristotle this is not so. According to Aristotle, reason and wisdom lead to truth, which is the ultimate good, or God. At the beginning of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says, "All men by nature desire to know." (Kaufmann p.247) To know something means to know its essence, and to know the essence of something one must have knowledge of the four causes as they apply to all beings. This knowledge, Aristotle then goes on to say, will bring one an understanding of being qua being, all of which, according to him, belongs to the ultimate good, or God. God is Aristotle's name for the original cause of all being, the original mover, so Aristotle's discussion of being qua being, his entire philosophy, begins and ends with the ultimate, unifying good of God. The ultimate pursuit, therefore, is to have wisdom of the good, of God.

According to Nietzsche, this proposed logical pursuit of truth is an avoidance of truth. The philosophic mind is indeed avoiding truth when searching for knowledge; so human beings are not seeking knowledge but rather to be freed from the pessimistic trap of meaninglessness. As Nietzsche states:

What were we to say of the end (or, worse, of the beginning) of all inquiry? Might it be that the 'inquiring mind' was simply the human mind terrified by pessimism and trying to escape from it, a clever bulwark erected against the truth? Something craven and false, if one wanted to be moral about it? Or, if one preferred to put it amorally, a dodge? Had this perhaps been your secret, great Socrates? Most secretive of ironists, had this been your deepest irony? (Nietzsche pp.4-5)

It appears that Aristotle, as was Plato, is guilty of creating myth to explain that which could not be explained by logic, and avoiding wisdom through a complex logical discussion of truth. Both philosophers seem to find it essential to unite all reality under one concept of truth. For Plato it is the beauty of the forms, and for Aristotle it is the ultimate good, or God.

While Plato and Aristotle are optimistic and seemingly content in their explanations of wisdom and truth, Nietzsche's philosophy is one of nihilism. For Nietzsche the real is the irrational rather than the rational, organized reality of Plato and Aristotle. Where Aristotle says "all men by nature desire to know," Nietzsche asks what is behind this obsession with truth? Truth for him is an arbitrary invention of the human mind, and our obsession with truth and reason suppresses life, stifles our free will. The reason which Plato and Aristotle discuss is not leading to truth, but rather is a substitute for the irrational, a screen preventing one from seeing the meaninglessness of the abyss. Rather than an obsessive search for reason, Nietzsche is concerned with illusion, that which precedes reason and will. Reason is a substitute for the irrational, allowing man to create a desired order, which in reality does not exist. Nietzsche's philosophy is a philosophy of the individual, the individual seeking his origins; it is not concerned with the ultimate truth.

Man is defined by being, which has its essence in the body. In this way Nietzsche's philosophy is similar to Aristotle's, who says man is defined by his body; form, matter, and essence are dependent upon one another. For Plato, as he discussed the body and the soul in *Phaedo*, the body was a prison of the soul. It is not what one does that matters to Plato, but what one thinks. Neither Aristotle nor Nietzsche share Plato's dualistic concept of body and soul. When speaking of the soul in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states, "namely that the soul consists of two parts, one irrational and the other capable of reason." (Kaufmann p.412) This is somewhat correlational to the two realms of art discussed by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, namely the Dionysian and Apollonian spirits. The Apollonian spirit is that of reasoning, logical comprehension, rationality, order, system, while the Dionysian spirit is opposed to order, desires to be at one with the

universe, captures the ecstasy and rapture of selflessness. Both of these spirits are necessary for creation, both artistic and biological. As Nietzsche describes them:

I wish to keep before me those two artistic deities of the Greeks, Apollo and Dionysus. They represent to me, most vividly and concretely, two radically dissimilar realms of art. Apollo embodies the transcendent genius of the principium individuationis; through him alone is it possible to achieve redemption in illusion. The mystical jubilation of Dionysus on the other hand, breaks the spell of individuation and opens a path to the maternal womb of being. (Nietzsche p.99)

While only through the Apollonian order and reason can man be saved by illusion, the Dionysian oneness and ecstasy are necessary leaders to the path of this illusion. Aristotle believes the irrational part of the soul containing desires contains no source of human excellence, for he says we "...may omit from consideration the nutritive part of the soul, since it exhibits no specifically human excellence." (Kaufmann p.413)

Unlike Plato and Aristotle, Nietzsche believes the soul does not exist. Nietzsche believes that we are bodies. He states in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "...body am I entirely and nothing else, and soul is only a word for something about the body." (Kaufmann p.213) It is our bodies that put us into existence and our bodies which can carry us into transcendence. Nietzsche's philosophy is a philosophy of action; man is defined not by what he thinks, but by what he does. Thus, Aristotle, Nietzsche and Greek tragedy accept death as death. There is no concept of an eternal soul, such as discussed by Plato. Life is temporary, and in this life people do not live up to their full potential; they study life rather than live it. Men, such as Plato and Aristotle, are afraid to face the Dionysian oneness with life, with being; therefore, they hide in reason, science, and representation in an attempt to avoid confrontation with nothingness. Men such as Plato and Aristotle begin to worship wisdom more than life. We become removed from life for we continuously attempt to put it in order, to contemplate life, rather than experience it. It is only the artists, such as those who compose music and conceive of Greek tragedy, not the philosophers, who recognize illusion. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,

Nietzsche discusses the "overman's" desire to repeat reality in illusion. According to Nietzsche, illusion is indeed another reality.

Ordering and rationalizing life in the way that Plato and Aristotle do, robs men of their will to power, their desire to transcend the abyss of nothingness. For Nietzsche, being and transcendence are found in height; he claims that everything which exists attempts to acquire height. As he wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: Second Part*, "Life wants to build itself up into the heights with pillars and steps; it wants to look into vast distances and out toward stirring beaches: therefore, it requires height. And because it requires height it requires steps and contradiction among the steps and the climbers. Life wants to climb and to overcome itself climbing." (Nietzsche p.141) Plato and Aristotle allow no room for contradiction, therefore they allow no room for height, for the will to power, for transcendence. One cannot begin to ascend the steps of transcendence without illusion, for if one lived immediately, one would sink and be absorbed into the abyss of life, into the masses. Life is understood through penetration, but reality does not penetrate life, therefore illusion is necessary.

Thus, Nietzsche believes that meaning and order are found in artistic creation; they are not inherent to being as Plato and Aristotle state. Much of this illusionistic reality is encompassed in music and in Greek tragedy. Music is a combination of the strength and light of the Dionysiac spirit and the Apollonian order. Music and Greek tragedy beckon us to penetrate existence. Greek tragedy at first entices us to look at it, then to contemplate the higher light behind the tragic myths. Thus tragedy makes one look and then desire to go beyond that look and see deeper. As Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy*, "The intense clarity of the image failed to satisfy us, for it seemed to hide as much as it revealed; and while it seemed to invite us to pierce the veil and examine the mystery behind it, its luminous concreteness nevertheless held the eye entranced and kept it from probing deeper." (Nietzsche p.141)

We are now, as modern men, living in a time when the optimism of Plato and Aristotle has been greatly shaken, especially by philosophers such as Nietzsche, and the terror of existence is beginning to reveal itself.

This perception has initiated a culture which I describe as tragic. Its most important characteristic is that wisdom is put in the place of science as the highest goal. This wisdom, unmoved by the pleasant distractions of the sciences, fixes its gaze on the total constellation of the universe and tries to comprehend sympathetically the suffering of that universe as its own. (Nietzsche p.151)

We must return to our Dionysian origins in our pursuit of wisdom, and this we begin to do through the spirit of music. For it is through the Dionysiac spirit that transcendence begins and man is spiritually united with man and nature. Man unites and becomes one with himself and with the world.

Greek tragedy and the Dionysian spirit have a relationship to the will to power, or the need to climb and obtain height. Gods like Apollo and Dionysos represents the elementary systems of man. Philosophy becomes a weapon to use against this spirit and therefore prevents transcendence. Philosophy is a disassociation from religion. The Dionysiac spirit requires participation which, according to Nietzsche, is a fundamental aspect of life. Philosophy removed from the study of life offers no transcendence, no wisdom, and no truth, for it is an avoidance of truth. Plato and Aristotle instruct one to listen to reason, yet it is, according to Nietzsche, through the spirit of music and of tragedy, of Apollo and of Dionysos that illusion and reality, wisdom and truth, are found.

FOOTNOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 111. Henceforth quoted as "Nietzsche."
2. Walter Kaufmann, ed. *Philosophic Classics*, p. 149. Henceforth quotes as "Kaufmann."

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